



# Storytelling For All

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Belfast librarian, **Liz Weir**, reflects on the power of story and its place on her home patch.

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*'A story told by a person is often more powerful, exciting and inspiring than one read from a book. The performer is able to highlight areas of interest with their eyes, expressions and gestures, making it a lasting and a memorable occasion.'*

**Usha Bahl**

*'In storytelling there is always a moral aspect. It is the moral that the audience waits for. Children learn about heroes and heroines. They learn about beliefs. And they learn about right and wrong.'*

**Amoafi Kwapong**

Storytelling is about *sharing* - not just the sharing of words and emotions, but the direct coming together of the teller and the listener, whether that takes place on a one-to-one or in a group situation. We are *all* storytellers, even if some of us are reluctant to 'perform' in public - we tell stories quite naturally as part of our everyday lives. For proof of this we need look no further than snatches of conversations overheard in the school corridor, the staff room or, better still, on a bus (the latter being the most tantalising experience since a bus-stop often looms before the denouement is reached!).

For those of us who work with children, sharing stories is a *privilege* - to watch a gang of street-wise ten-year-olds still capable of open-mouthed suspense at a ghost story is an uplifting experience. But this is much more than an ego trip for the storyteller - it reflects the staunch defence of the case for the preservation of the oral tradition.

Storytelling enables children to learn to listen in an age when many are lacking in concentration skills. And if they're telling the stories themselves, it gives them the opportunity to express emotion and use their imaginations with a freedom no other medium can offer.

**With Toddlers**

Telling stories to children too young to read for themselves has long been accepted. Much has been written about the importance of this early contact, the need to promote language development in the pre-school years, to foster a life-long interest in books. But these early experiences mustn't be left to wither. Storytelling has still a place and, I would argue, continues to have a place throughout our lives. There's quite a commonly held view, for instance, that it's a bit pointless to tell stories or share picture books with a child who can read for herself. It's my contention that teacher and pupils are brought much closer together through exchanging stories; this very sharing with which I began.

**With Minority Groups**

If storytelling can bring individuals together, it can also bring together groups within our society. Physically handicapped and able bodied children can all share the thrill of an exciting yarn. The intellectually impaired child can delight in joining in, even if her reactions are slightly slower than the rest. Through stories we can all experience the rich variety of human experience from the aboriginal 'dreamtime' to inner city decay. Stories can promote a sense of tolerance between religious or racial groupings - mother tongue storytelling can at the same time preserve a cultural identity. Stories linger on receiving this unexpected long greeting from an 18-year-old Imagine skinhead: 'Hey, Missus, are you the woman from the library that told us about the five wee Chinese men?' (Who could deny it?)

*'Tales can link us with people thousands of years ago, people who felt as we feel, and to their many different cultures. They speak to our feelings in an unforgettable way and help us to respect the great moments of life such as birth, youth, love, marriage, age, harmony and death, and they warn us against disrespect and disobedience for these life forces.'*

### **Margaret Leona**

*'There is a magic number in the telling of stories. To be "real", a story must have a beginning, a middle and an end. The three basic rules for telling it well are:*

- 1. Know your story sufficiently well to tell it fluently.*
- 2. Think it is a good story - not only for your audience but for you yourself.*
- 3. Enjoy telling it!'*

### **The late H E Todd**

*'Social unity is generated by the very act of traditional storytelling, with the teller's art gaining strength of transmission by the feedback of the listener.'*

### **Linda Williamson**

Quotations throughout the article are taken from the 1988 **List of Storytellers** available from the National Community Folklore Centre, Middlesex Polytechnic, All Saints, White Hart Lane, London N17 8HR (tel: 01 -801 3434, ext. 6332).

### **With Parents**

Storytelling is a terrific way to bring parents and children closer - family storytelling sessions held in libraries in the evening have attracted excellent support and not just in 'yuppie' areas. We must all remember that many parents have no real experience of the oral tradition - often it will be the grannies who will remember the traditional playground chants and skipping rhymes. These family sessions help mothers and fathers relax and enjoy the experience with their children - sharing once again.

### **Belfast Tales**

In Belfast the public library service provides a citywide summer storytelling programme with temporary storytellers and library staff performing up to 50 sessions a week. Venues include leisure centres, parks, hospital wards and community halls, sometimes visiting places where only the brave survive. Not exactly idyllic conditions, but the response from children and community leaders is warm and friendly and visits are often heralded by choruses of 'The storytellers are coming!' Storytelling is firmly established as an integral part of summer activities in the city, and the age range at sessions is best demonstrated by one centre where the youngest listener was three and the oldest, Granny Logan, was 90 - stories bridge the age gap as well. Volunteers now tell stories in a geriatric unit and monthly adult 'Yarn Spinning' sessions at the Linen Hall Library are attended by audiences of 100-plus with an age range from teenagers to pensioners.

### **The Rise of the Storyteller**

Visits to Belfast by several American storytellers, keen to participate, remind us that in the United States storytelling has

a much higher profile, with the National Storytelling Festival attracting visitors by the thousand. But the revival is well under way in the British Isles - the National Community Folktale Centre's 1988 list of storytellers shows just how many people are now performing in the UK and more storytelling festivals are planned. In the past the storyteller was a well respected visitor and the true value of storytelling was perhaps more widely perceived. Today those of us who truly believe in the power of storytelling must set about making sure that this message is spread. It is hard to quantify the value of storytelling in this age of 'output measurement' but day by day observation of children's response to stories confirms my belief that we all need to keep promoting the art.

## **Storytelling for All**

Yes, *all* of us are storytellers but we don't all have to be world beaters - it isn't a competition. Just tell stories which you enjoy, support others who tell stories, organise an 'event' locally. Encourage children to tell their own stories or retell favourites for their peers. Everyone has a role to play, but lest we all take ourselves too seriously I must add a cautionary footnote. There is a little known condition called 'storytelleritis' which is always omitted from storytelling textbooks. This affliction is likely to strike after concentrated periods of storytelling and children's librarians are in a high risk category. The symptoms are that the sufferer talks in phrases taken from well known stories such as 'just awful' (from the story of the same name), 'truly enormous and dreadful to behold' ('Little Boy's Secret') and 'get 'em, I'll pay good gold' ('Jim and the Beanstalk'). The only cure is to have de-programming sessions with questions such as 'How many hot water bottles had Phoebe?' (157) or 'Name the wild Washerwomen' (Lottie, Dottie, Molly, Dolly, Winnie, Minnie and Ernestine).

Take care - but spread the word!

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